Confessions of A Has-Been

A Typical Human Interest Story—The Career of a Big-League Star—A Slip in the World's Series—Crowing Old—Waiting For the Inevitable End

By J. C. KOFOED

The following story, which is thinly fiction, but which is annually duplicated in a score of actual experiences gives a clear picture of the human side, in some ways the tragic side, of baseball. It is inevitable that the old star must move on with the procession to make room for the newcomer. This is the invariable rule in all business, and baseball is no exception. But after all it is rather hard on the old star.

I AM not in the "big show" now. To the uninitiated that may not mean much, but it sums up in a word the fact that I am a "has-been," and it hurts.

Perhaps an ex-major leaguer should control his emotions with a sterner hand, but this slab sided little town with the great mountains behind it rasps on my nerves. It boasts a baseball team, does Three Forks—if you can dignify such an aggregation with any title at all—and it rests in the cellar of the bushiest sage-brush league in the country.

Yes, I play on the Three Forks team, and if it didn't have a hint of pathos in it for me I should think it a capital joke. Here I am, Billy Joy, whom the experts once called the greatest shortstop in the game, playing on the Three Forks team of the Minnelooka League. It is to laugh!

We lost to-day. It was my fault, I suppose, but, then, every man makes an error once in awhile. The fans never think of that, though. "Can that old has-been," they yelled. "Get a real player." And five years before there was not one of them who would not have felt honored by a word from me.

For two decades my name was a household word. I was the greatest player in the game until Cobb blazed into prominence. Then I took second place, but there is quite a difference between a star player of a champion team, and the hooted infielder of a bush leaguer.

Whose fault is it? Mine, of course. I made big money, even as baseball salaries go, but I squandered it as fast as I received it. The "sports" called me a good fellow, but no one remembers Bill Joy now. I'm not kicking, understand. It's the way of the world to forget.

My folks all died before I was eighteen, and by that time I was "pounding brass" in a small town railway station. Baseball was not on the firm foundation that it is now. I never thought of playing the game professionally, though it had been my hobby since I was a kid.

There was another fellow working in the office with me, a big, blonde Dane named Hansen, who played shortstop on the Excelsiors. His club was scheduled for an exhibition game with the champion New Yorks, and Hansen, usually as restless as a sphinx, was on edge with excitement. That was twenty years ago, you know, when Tim Keefe, Roger Connor, Jim Ward, Buck Ewing and the rest made up one of the greatest teams that ever represented the Metropolis.

Hansen was struck by a freight on the morning of the game, and his leg was fractured in two places. When I visited him in the hospital he was nearly frantic. "Who'll play short?" he kept repeating over and over again. "My God! I must play." Then, and the shock of it nearly stunned me. "You, Bill, you take my place."

"Me play against those professionals!" I demanded aghast. "You must be crazy!"

"I've seen you play. You are good enough. You must, Bill. Will you?"

And the upshot of it was that, to keep the boy quiet, I consented. When the Excelsiors went out on the field that afternoon I was at shortstop.

We lost, of course, for Tim Keefe was pitching, and when he was right I never saw his equal. Whether it was luck, or whether the big pitcher was careless I don't know, but I hit him safely three times. When the game was over Mr. Mutrie, the New York manager, came over to me.

"Joy," he said. "Did you ever think of playing professional ball?"

"No," I replied, and my blood began to pump faster. "Why?"

"I'd like to give you a try-out. The season is about over, but if you make good you'll stick next year."

"How much is in it for me?"

"Fifteen hundred for the season."

That sounded awfully big. I was earning eighteen dollars a week as a telegrapher, and a jump like that seemed tremendous. So the words boggled themselves in their eagerness to accept that munificent offer.

I made good from the start, and for three years I played shortstop on the New York team. It is true that I did nothing exceptionally spectacular, but I hit and fielded well enough to keep me in the fickle public eye. Then the dark shape of trouble came winging in.

Four of us were engaged in our nightly poker game toward the end of my third year with the team. The time passed rapidly, and it is possible that we became less discreet than we should have done. Mutrie, hearing us, broke up the game about 3.30 A. M. Training rules were in no wise as strict as they are now, but the manager could not overlook such a flagrant breach of discipline. So he fined us twenty-five dollars each on the spot!

I, being youthful and hot headed, made a remark anent managers with wooden heads, ivory not then having come in vogue. Mutrie, in no mood to stand for insubordination, plastered on another twenty-five dollar fine, and I lashed out a solid blow from the shoulder, knocking him down.

The instant I did it I was sorry, not only because of the punishment that was due me, but because I had made such a witless ass of myself. I've asked Mutrie's pardon since, and he has freely granted it.

But then I was too intently absorbed in watching the manager's face. Astonishment struggled with wrath until bewilderment was the paramount expression. The other men, sobered by my rash act, helped him to his feet, where he swayed a bit, watching the red flush of shame burn in my cheeks.

"Joy," he said in a curious, cracked voice. "You'll never play on my team again. I'm done with you." That was all, but the next day I was sold to—well, you can guess the team.

The season after I left New York my best luck—and there was, no doubt, a considerable modicum of good fortune intermixed with my hard work—began. Within another three years I was called the greatest infielder in the game, and my pay check soared to the five thousand mark. But it didn't satisfy me. I was spending too much money, and I needed more.

Then came the launching of the American League. I knew how salaries had bounded during the days of the Brotherhood, and it was just as logical that they would increase now. As a star, it was only natural that I should be approached, and so I waited for an American League representative to call. My contract expired at the close of the season, and morally, if not according to baseball law, I was a free agent.

I had met Betty when I first joined the club. This is not a story of sentiment, but I'll acknowledge that my love for that girl changed the whole current of my life. She was the daughter of the club president, and so I met her nearly every day. Love soon grew in my heart—but I'm clumsy in telling things that concern me deeply.

Well—she died, and the incentive for everything went out of my life. The sun didn't shine as it had before, the sky was dull, my whole body was listless and heavy. But I had to be out on the field the day after her funeral, playing my best, though my heart was down under the sod with her——

I had promised her that I would stick by the team until my playing days were

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over, and even if I had not pledged my word, the gentle sweetness of her spirit would have kept me faithful even to her unspoken wish.

It was less than a week after her burial that an American League representative, a fat, double chinned man with offensively soft hands, cornered me in the lobby of my hotel.

"Joy," he said impressively, wagging a be-diamoned finger. "The American League is here to stay. We want you, and we'll give you anything in reason. Name your figures."

"You haven't enough money to make me jump," I said mildly.

"Come, come! You're drawing five thousand a year at the most. We'll double that. We'll give you the highest salary ever paid a ball player—ten thousand dollars a year."

"No," I said, and that ended it. The fat man accepted it as an ultimatum and discreetly faded back to his employers. Ten thousand dollars for less than eight months work is a big salary. I'm only making fifteen hundred now with the Three Forks team, but if Betty didn't want me to accept another offer like that (though God knows it will never come) I would turn it down cheerfully for her sake. You may call it sickly sentiment if you will, but the knowledge that I had done as she wished was worth all the money in the world to me. And so I stayed in the National League, and was true to her memory. Had I gone—but that is another matter:

Up until a few years ago I was still with my old team. I had been playing baseball for seventeen years; a long, long time for a man to hold out against the crudest competition in the world. Each year as I went through the terrible muscle racking of another spring training I told myself almost fiercely that I was as good as ever. And I always believed it. Even when I read in the glass that youth was no longer mine—and the tanned, lined face with the shock of greying hair was convincing proof—I clung to the belief that my ball playing was as good as ever. Though a veteran of the field I was not yet thirty-seven. At the age when most men are getting a two handed grip on the big things of life I was fading out. I had never saved money, and the monthly pay check was the only hope—with the certainty that that must cease within a few years at most.

The sporting writers called me old, yet most of them were reporting ball games before I ever thought of the big league, Why, barring Bush, of the Planet, and Goodwin, of the Gazette, most of them were nearly old enough to be my father. Yet they were figuratively speaking of me as an applicant for admittance to the Old Men's Home.

It would have seemed funny, but for the tragedy it meant for me. My mind, filled to the brim with baseball knowledge, worked as swiftly as ever, but the co-ordination between mind and muscle was a fraction of a second slower than big league speed demanded. But that tiny bit of time caused me to strike out instead of hitting the ball; to miss by inches the grounders I would have fielded easily in other days.

During the pennant chase I was forced to realize that I was no longer playing up to form. For weeks my hitting had been light, my fielding erratic, yet I would not admit that it was anything more than a temporary slump. I could not bring myself to realize that I was a "has-been."

To complicate matters more for me, McGarry, the manager, had picked up a sensational infielder from California. And, as the days passed by, I realized that it was only a question of time when young Morgan would succeed me.

When the blow fell I took it stolidly as all big leaguers learn to do. McGarry, a good man, though blunt of speech, told me to lay off a bit.

"You need a little rest, Bill," was all he said. "Maybe a week or two on the bench will fix you up."

Morgan made good from the jump. He was a wonder on ground balls with a "whip" of steel, and—best of all—the hitting strength of Lajoie. Every day I saw my chance of getting back in the line-up growing more remote.

You remember that we won the championship of our league rather easily that season. The papers gave much of the credit to young Morgan, and I am not saying but what the boy deserved it. Down underneath my disappointment at losing my job, I was glad to see the boy succeed. Some veteran of the "big show"

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who reads this may doubt my statement, but I was honestly glad. The boy realized what it cost me to sit on the bench day after day, and he was very considerate.

The World's Series—those games in which every big leaguer hopes one day to participate—opened with Morgan playing my position. I had seen four of these contests, and this was the first one in which I had not been actively engaged. Our opponents were the valorous, hard hitting Savages, an aggregation balanced almost perfectly by youth and experience.

Six games had been played, and through sheer luck and the wonderful throwing of our big southpaw, Barry, we had managed to win three. Now we were battling desperately to take the decisive contest.

I was sitting on the bench, with the green, widespread field flattened before me, where the men in blue and the men in white were battling at each other's throats for the money and honor of a championship, when the realization came to me that I was done as a big leaguer. Why the sudden feeling of weakness should come just then I do not know. Every nerve and muscle was taut in sympathy with the boys fighting out there under the garish glare of the sun, yet I felt suddenly old and grey. The inevitable —the shadow that always hung in the background during my major league career—had flung its grisly darkness on me at last.

Out on the billiard ball smoothness of the field baseball history was in making, and I forgot myself as I gazed. There were two Savage runners on the paths, with one down. I found myself watching Barry with fascinated interest as he wound up. A hit now would practically lose the game, and with the game would go thousands of dollars. The suspense of sitting there inactive made me squirm uneasily. I even had time to mutter angrily to myself as the big pitcher grinned over his chew of tobacco. It was almost unbearable.

MacCool, the Savage first baseman was at bat, a deadly hitter and fast as a streak. Barry could not have had a harder man to face, but he appeared almost unconcerned as he prepared to pitch his famous "cross-fire."

I straightened up, my throat dry, my gnarled "bread winners" twisting uneasily, and my gaze shifted involuntarily to the boy who was filling my place. He was so lithe, so graceful, that I wondered dully if Nature would overcome him as she had me by making me that ghastly fraction of a second slower——

Bat cracked against ball, and the horsehide bounded down over second base. Morgan sped to his left, twisted his bare right hand to an incredible angle and forked the ball, touched the bag with his toe and whipped the ball to first for one of the most remarkable double plays I have ever seen.

The boy's face was white when he came to the bench, and McGarry noticed it as he noticed everything with those keen eyes of his. "What's the matter, Jack?"

"That damned ball broke my thumb," Morgan snarled. "Hey, you, Timmy—" to the trainer—"see if you can fix it."

Timmy shook his head dolefully. "You're out of this game, kid," he sympathized, as he started to bandage it. Despite Morgan's pleadings to be allowed to play, McGarry nodded to me. "You take his place, Bill."

A sudden qualm of fear shook me from head to heels. What right had they to put me in. I was a "has-been"—I knew it now!

When the umpire shouted, "Joy playing short in place of Morgan," the crowd gave a cheer. I was great in my day, and they remembered it. That isn't boasting. It is the mere truth.

But I, the veteran of a thousand gruelling battles, was afraid. There was Barry and Lord, the first baseman, and Collins, my partner at the keystone sack, grinning encouragingly at me, but I was afraid. My arm felt weak, my nerves frayed to ribbons, but no one suspected.

Until the ninth inning rolled around there was practically nothing for me to do. I handled my only chance, a weak little roller that a child could hardly have missed. So the Savages came up for the last half of the inning with the score tied.

I do not think that McGarry was apprehensive, for Barry's twirling had been superb. The first two Savages slashed wicked drives to the outfield which lanky, lean jawed Williams took without difficulty. It may be that the speed with which the balls were driven shook Barry's nerve

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somewhat. At any rate he passed the next batter, and the stage was set for trouble.

It was a momentary lack of control on the southpaw's part, I presume, for the ball shot down the "grove," as he said afterward, with "nothing on it but the stitches." The batter swung as though he would never get another chance in this life, and the ball screamed toward me like a bullet.

The same thing had happened to me thousands of times in my long career—yet a horror of fumbling that ball rose in my throat the instant I saw that it was headed for me.

Of course, it was not an easy situation. Imagine yourself on a ball field, with forty thousand shrieking fans staring with distended eyes on the erratic course of a hard driven ball. On the clean handling of that chance rested a difference in purse money of a thousand dollars for each of my team mates.

And yet, I think I should not have fumbled it as I did if I had not felt myself a has-been. That awful, choking fear was a direct result of my thought on the bench. I am no psychologist, but I realize that.

The ball struck my numbed fingers, flashed up at a ninety degree angle. I knocked it down, scuffled for it in the grass. From the corner of my eye I saw the Savage runner rounding third. Only a rapid, perfect throw to first could cut off the winning tally and again I failed in the emergency. The instant the ball left my fingers I knew in a stunning, heart sick flash that the game and the series was lost, and that my major league career was finished. I would be remembered not for the many games I had helped to win, but for this all important one that I had thrown away.

With the other members of the team I returned to the hotel. No one said a word in reproach or sympathy, and save for a consoling pat from Morgan's uninjured hand I might as well have been absent. Moody eyed, taciturn, McGarry stared helplessly out of the 'bus window, and there were actual tears in Barry's eyes.

As for me, the whole world was black, meaningless. The absolute bitterness of despair was mine. Never before, save once—when I had lost the greatest treasure of my life—had the outlook been so dark. My own share of the money figured least of all. It was for my comrades that I mourned.

Everyone—even the newspapers—were kinder than I expected. But under their excuses lay a veiled bitterness that could not escape me. I, the has-been, had tossed a world's championship away from the city I had represented so long.

The president of the club—Betty's father—gave me my release personally. "I am sorry to do this, Joy," he said gravely, after he had notified me that I was a free agent, "but there is no choice in it for me. Organized baseball is a business and business knows no friendship. Your past counts for nothing. Only your ability to-day would justify us in keeping you."

I knew that to be true. He was acting as any magnate would have done, and I could not complain. So I accepted my release, thanking him in a low voice. We did not mention Betty——

It was not hard for me to secure a position in a class AA league, for my name was still a great advertisement in itself. But it takes strength and nerve, and, above all, youth, even in the minor leagues, and I was a has-been. So, before the next season passed I drifted still further down the scale of organized baseball.

My career is practically over. One must play fair ball even in the Minnelooka League, and my ball playing days are done. Every afternoon as I trot out on the sandy, knobby diamond of Three Forks, with the eternal Rockies sheering up behind me into the blue of the sky, I wonder when the blow will fall. It cannot be far away now. Though still under forty, I'm old, gray, ambitionless, a rusty cog in a cheap machine.

I'm a has-been—and I know it now!

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